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The Guide to Leadership: How the System's Daughter Learned Strength

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Get good grades, behave like a lady, and respect your elders. Look out for your sister, call your grandparents, and keep your room clean. Say your prayers before you go to bed, be aware of your surroundings, and think before you speak. Look both ways before you cross the street, watch your back, and be extra careful around the police. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Know your rights and recognize that not everyone who wears a smile on their face has your best interest at heart. The latter, more preventative rules address the many worries that my role models and influences have as Blacks in America. Rules, rules, and more rules. Some are specific to being a student and attaining a quality education, while others are designed to dictate my behavior and actions as a female. Through these rules and expectations, guidelines have been set to govern my identity as an older sibling, eldest daughter, and African-American woman. The distrusting nature that many of my elders have come to develop, stemming from years of institutional and personal discrimination, clouded my thoughts as I maneuvered through my educational career, leaving a very comfortable public middle school with peers who physically looked like me to the private institutions that I would later enter in high school and eventually college.

During my child and adolescent years at James Flood Magnet school of Science and Technology, once one of the leading schools in the Ravenswood City School District, I was introduced to the harsh realities of life as a minority in a low-income neighborhood. This meant the presence of deviant behavior, the resistance of authority, and the normalcy of crime and drugs. In fact, in my seventh and eighth grade years, I remember the boys in my class going off to explore the wealthy areas of Menlo Park and Atherton that surrounded our school. Focused on what they could gain, they never returned to the classroom after break. At this very impressionable age, I had gotten used to hearing stories about how these young boys would win money from their peers shooting dice after school on a neighborhood street corner, or how the middle school Casanova had objectified some girl. Teen pregnancy was normal, gang violence was expected, and any hope for a reality that did not contain the two was rare and practically unrealistic. It seemed almost natural to know someone who had become a professional smoker or drinker before they saw their first prom, and infidelity in young relationships, which resulted in years of low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in most of the girls I knew, was inevitable. As a collective of unruly children who underwent a full academic year of consistent substitute teachers in the seventh grade, my peers and I developed a sense of resentment and resistance toward authority. We were not yet aware or able to fully understand that our fates were pre-determined by institutional discrimination and a lack of access to a quality education. At the time, we could only do our best to survive with the circumstances we were given, a similar task facing those who came before me.

In nature, we see how incredible amounts of pressure can transform hard rocks into diamonds. As the eldest of six siblings, mother of two, and child care provider to many, my diamond, Rae Jean Betts, lived and breathed leadership. Finding a way to financially support her and her family despite the absence of a college degree, my grandma taught in Ravenswood Child Care center for over thirty years. She retired only to open and run her own child care center from her home, remaining an influential and nurturing force in the lives of the children she worked with.

On December 21st 2014, My sister, mother and I took care of absolutely everything for my grandma Rae Jean. Nia made us all lunch, my mom dusted all of the beautifully decorated elephants grandma collected, along with the mantle and the coffee table, while I vacuumed the living room and toy room where the kids she took care of played. I can remember giving my grandma a neck and back massage, while my mom tweezed her eyebrows like she usually does, and Nia made lemonade iced tea with the perfect sweet to tart ratio. I can recall sitting at the dining room table as Nia and my grandma explained the card game “Tonk” to me in a kind of “learn as you go” method, where I lost several hands as they left out key details of the game. At the end of each round, grandma would rush us to shuffle the cards again so that we could have time for one more round before my mom was ready to leave. She wanted to get in as many games as we could. I can remember our laughter drowning out the sound of the football game my mom was watching—me in denial that I could possibly lose another hand, and my sister and grandma rejoicing in my confusion that led to one loss after another. Sensing the time passing and the traffic back home getting worse, my grandma told us to hurry and shuffle the cards for one final game.

Everything about this last visit was surreal. It was almost as if my grandma secretly knew it would be our last. I can remember my mom telling her that we forgot to bring my graduation pictures to the house, but that we would make sure to bring them when we came back the following week.

“You’re going to cry when you see it Mom. It’s so beautiful,” my mom said to my grandma.

“Of course it is,” my grandma responded. “I’m sooo very proud of you, Maya.”

We played our last game of Tonk and got ready to say our goodbyes. Before we left, I can distinctly remember my mom telling Nia to go give my grandma a big tight hug, and as Nia was getting ready to let go, she said, “Wait, go back and give her another one.” I gave my hugs and kisses and we all walked out the house and to the car.

“Thanks for coming to visit me, babies. I love you all so much.”

“We’ll probably come back next week for Christmas,” my mom said.

“Oh no, you guys don’t have to do that. It’s such a drive,” she responded warmly.

We laughed. There was nothing we’d rather do on Christmas day than spend it with family.

December 22nd in Fairfield seemed even more hazy and gray than the day before. My grandma’s house had gone from being a place of comfort and warmth for my mother, sister, and I to a place filled with sadness, my step-grandfather’s children, the families of the children my grandma raised, and other individuals I did not recognize or care to meet. Somehow in the span of twenty-four hours this house—once a beacon of love and familiarity—became so uninviting and unfamiliar. I couldn’t stand to sit on the couch that I had carelessly lounged on days before, and, despite the crowd, there was a cold wave of emptiness and absence. My mother and I swiftly removed ourselves from the unfamiliar in search of the security of cold air and bodiless front yard. I watched the disorientation of what had become reality in my mom’s eyes. I can never get use to seeing her so heartbroken. The woman who made me into parentalized child—always seeking my opinion and advice—had become a parentless parent. Already use to being a fatherless daughter, my mom could now add being a motherless mother to her list of identities.

What could I possibly say as a parentalized child that would ease the heartache and pain my parentless mother was facing? I felt hopeless. I cried most nights—not because I lost my grandma and she would never have the chance to see me graduate, have a career, get married, or have a family—but because my mom would see all those things and not have her very best friend to share it with, and there was nothing I could do about it. There was the pain of losing one of my #1 fans and biggest supporters, and then there was the pain of watching my mom lose the same thing.

Work hard, be kind, and forever seek knowledge and growth. Never back down from a challenge or let anyone disrespect you. Be brave, be bold, and be you.

A hard worker, caregiver and educator who didn’t take any disrespect or back-talk from anyone, and who always told me to spread my wings and fly—regardless of how far away it might take me—left me to soar without her. A trailblazer who could make you laugh to the point of tears with her wild soul that always wanted to have a good time now watches from above, leaving my family with memories of her words of wisdom, lively personality, and guide to leadership as a strong Black woman.